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ABSTRACT

Historically, policies and funding guidelines for most federal educational programs have not adequately recognized the diverse nature of rural schools. A dichotomy of rural and urban, or, even a tripartite classification (urban, suburban, and rural) would mask the internal diversity of rural schools. Current efforts to understand the condition of public education in this country will fall short unless this diversity is acknowledged. The federal government, particularly the Department of Education, should take the lead in developing a policy-impact code for classifying the nation's rural school districts. A desirable policy-impact code would use variables that have demonstrated predictive value relevant to differences among rural districts, would include all rural school districts, and would be limited to a number of categories small enough to be recognized and understood easily. Other criteria may include content of indicators (relevance for policy formation) and data collection standards. Such criteria suggest a causal approach to indicator development that would include four classes of indicators: context (school and community characteristics); input (characteristics of students, staff, and fiscal input); process (school programs and services, class size, and leadership); and outcome (test scores, attendance and completion rates, and post-school outcomes such as employment). An initial literature review identified about 90 specific indicators arguably important enough for inclusion. (SV)

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Toward the Construction of a Federal Policy-Impact Code for Classifying the Nation's Rural School Districts

Occasional Paper 34

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The Appalachia Educational Laboratory (AEL), Inc., works with educators in ongoing R & D-based efforts to improve education and educational opportunity. AEL serves as the Regional Educational Laboratory for Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. It also operates the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. AEL works to improve:

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PREFACE

AEL presents this occasional paper in two parts: an overview and a working paper. We developed the paper in this format because of its content and approach.

The overview summarizes the nature of the problem the author addresses.

In the working paper, the author presents his detailed analysis of a controversial problem. The paper challenges readers to join the author in thinking through the problem and in arriving at a consensus solution.

AEL looks forward to publishing the consensus solution in a future paper.

Executive Summary

Rationale

Historically, the policies and funding guidelines for the majority of federal programs involving education have not distinguished between urban and rural schools. The exceptions to this generalization, such as recent efforts to target special groups (e.g., the disadvantaged or those with limited English proficiency), have tended toward a proliferation of definitions that raise new problems of consistency.

Looking toward the future, a tripartite distinction between urban, suburban, and rural would be preferable to the current standards and a simple urban-rural dichotomy. But, even a tripartite classification would mask the internal diversity of rural schools. This defect is serious because substantial evidence suggests that rural schools are more different from each other than is the case for schools within urban or suburban categories. A classification system that fails to take this diversity into account raises problems both of usefulness and equity. Current ambitious efforts to better understand the condition of public education in the country would fall short unless this diversity is acknowledged.

The federal government should take the lead in developing a policy-impact code for classifying the nation's rural school districts. Although the federal government's financial contribution to elementary and secondary education averages only about six percent of total funding, its influence is far larger. Federal data requirements tend to drive the design of state reporting systems. Moreover, there appears to be growing political support for an increase in the federal presence in education, especially in the area of standards and reporting (e.g., the "national report card"). There have also been strong bipartisan expressions of support for a national rural development policy, of which education must be a key component.

Federal on-budget support for education extends across a wide range of agencies. The Department of Education spends over three times as much on education as does the agency with the next-largest level of expenditure, but its outlays in FY 1989 nevertheless accounted for only 44.2 percent of the federal total. The Department of Education should take the lead in classification efforts, and that an interagency approach is important. The Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the agency with primary responsibility for collecting, analyzing, and publishing educational statistics, has taken a useful step with the development of a seven-category classification system based on population and population density (the "Johnson code"). The "Johnson code" does not account for the diversity of rural schools, but it does provide important building blocks for a system that would do so.

The Proposed Design of a Policy-Impact Code

A desirable policy-impact code would meet at least three standards: (1) substantive relevance (i.e., its variables would have been demonstrated to have predictive value in accounting for differences among rural school districts); (2) exhaustiveness (all rural school districts would be included); and (3) numerical relevance (the number of categories would be small

enough and distinctive enough to permit them to be readily recognized and understood). These standards in turn suggest other criteria related both to the content of indicators (for example, that they be policy-relevant) and data collection (for example, that they must be available at the rural school district level).

Applying these and similar standards adapted from scholarly literature on taxonomy construction leads to the choice of the causal approach to indicator development that would include four classes of indicators:

- context indicators (characteristics of the school district and the community within which it is located);
- input indicators (characteristics of students, staff, and fiscal inputs);
- process indicators (such as the availability and content of school programs, including factors like class size, support services, and school leadership); and
- outcome indicators (such as test scores, attendance and completion rates, incidence of both positive behaviors like civic involvement and negative ones like drug use, and post-school outcomes relating to employment, military service, and higher education).

An initial review of relevant sources led to identification of approximately 90 specific indicators arguably important enough for inclusion.

Proposed Next Steps

The Commissioner of Education Statistics, NCES, should convene and manage a panel to study the issues raised in this paper. Federal leadership is preferred because of the central role NCES will be playing to greatly expand the profile on the condition of public education. This advantage outweighs the advantages of an independent, nonfederal panel. Nevertheless, the panel should include nonfederal specialists in rural affairs, including personnel from state education agencies.

The panel would consider both policy factors, such as the functions a classification code is intended to perform, and technical issues, including implementation procedures. Although in an ideal world where policy issues should be resolved before a technical panel is convened, this is unlikely to happen in practice. Conversely, a wide-ranging and objective analysis of classification options may highlight policy issues and lead to a more productive debate on larger questions of equity and strategies to improve rural school quality.

INTRODUCTION

The public school universe in this nation is a huge enterprise, involving as it does more than 15,000 school districts who maintain more than 83,000 schools, serve approximately 40 million students in grades K-12, and employ slightly more than 2.2 million teachers and nearly an equal number of other staff. The monies expended in support of this undertaking are also significant, mounting to approximately $235 billion in 1986-87 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1991).

Historically, education assistance programs administered by various departments and independent agencies of the federal government have overwhelmingly viewed this universe as a monolith. More recently, and, it would seem, largely as a result of Congressional insistence, some, but still clearly not a significant portion, of federal efforts in education have begun to reflect in their intended targeted institutions and clientele a view that the public school universe should, at least in part, be considered a bifurcated system composed of essentially two broad categories of public school districts—urban and rural. Most of this shift has occurred in the Congressional practice of supporting new education programs that increasingly target special populations of students, and then the further practice of earmarking or establishing a set-aside for either urban and/or rural special populations, such as the disadvantaged, the homeless, the gifted and talented, the limited English proficiency, the handicapped, and the American Indian.

This relatively new position, though still not the prevailing practice for the vast majority of federal education programs, it is to be stressed, would nonetheless be viewed as a measure of progress by some rural education advocates who have over the years called attention to the perceived shortcomings of federal support for rural schools (Bass & Berman, 1979; Gjelten, 1980; N. E. Hearn, personal communication, July 9, 1981; Sher, 1977).

The recent increasing recognition that there is a need to address the special problems of both rural and urban systems, however, still falls short of providing a necessary prerequisite step for the formulation of federal policies and their resultant programs that are meaningful, as well as equitable. Hardly anyone would argue with the position that the one, single, essential precondition for good public policymaking is the right definition of the problem that is to be addressed by a public policy (and in its resultant operational programs). Two premises are made here that suggests the federal government's still predominant position of viewing the public school universe as a monolith is no longer justifiable and must be discontinued:

- It can be argued that on the basis of most indicators that measure the health or performance of an educational institution, it is probably more accurate to characterize the public school universe as a tripartite having three major categories—urban, rural, and suburban, as shown in Figure 1; and, importantly, each of which has a number of clearly distinguishable subgroups.
- Furthermore, it can also be argued that the rural school district component of this tripartite, though increasingly having much in common with many urban systems, is even more diverse than the other two.[1]

These two serve as the basis for one additional premise:

- The decision to acknowledge the complexities of the rural component of the public school universe

operating in this nation is a political one, as most policy choices in the final analysis are, and not a technical one, for a reasonably acceptable technical solution that would better address the diversity in this component, though difficult, is nonetheless attainable.

The focus of this paper is on the second and third of the three premises established above. That it is important to acknowledge diversity in rural education has been commented on by many and for a very long period of time (Butterworth and Dawson, 1952; Commission on Schools in Rural Communities, 1939; Nachtigal, 1982; National Education Association [NEA], 1955; Sher, 1977).

Sher's observation is typical of those of others who lament the propensity of members of the policy community to view rural schools as a single whole:

> The point is that rural America is far too heterogeneous and complex to be amenable to simplistic definitions or comfortable stereotypes...like rural America as a whole, rural schools and school districts are distinguished by their diversity. Despite increasing standardization, rural schools still tend to reflect the pluralism found among the rural communities they serve...as a consequence, treating rural schools and school districts as if they were a unified, monolithic entity would be a serious mistake (p. 1).

Gjelten's (1982) oft-quoted observation is also instructive:

> ...despite their homogeneity, very small districts in this country are as different from each other as they are from suburban or urban school systems (p. 12).

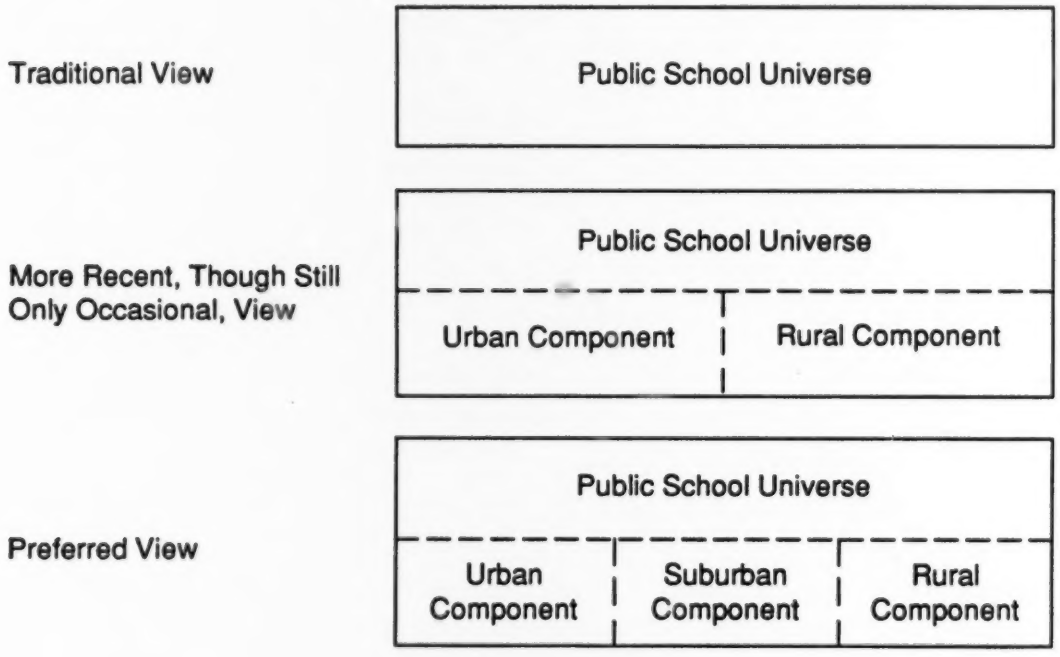

Figure 1
Preferred View of the Public School Universe

Yet many of the frequently eloquent calls for caution in lumping all rural school districts into one category tend to be relatively silent on how to account for the dissimilarities that they argue exist. Or, they tend to describe differing types of rural communities and then extend these dominant community features to distinguish types of rural schools, on the assumption (correctly, I believe) that rural schools reflect the norms of the communities they serve more than other types of schools do.[2]

The extensive use of community features as the primary building block for classifying rural districts, however, tends to give great weight to qualitative measures. Though clearly important, it is not likely that the federal policy communities can base major national policy goals and program objectives on such measures. Rather, federal policy has in the past and likely always will be driven by quantifiable data. So the issue confronting rural school interests especially, as well as those concerned generally about both the equity and effectiveness of any federal initiatives, is one of establishing a defensible way to account for their similarities and dissimilarities, but to do so with measures that are most amenable to the norms of federal policy analysis.

Small size and a relative degree of isolation are not just widely recognized common features of most rural school districts, they are their defining characteristics. Moreover, the small size of rural systems accounts for other important defining features as well, such as small-scale programming and staffing. Yet, these and other typical attributes do not account for all, nor not necessarily even the most important, demonstrable differences that exist among these small-scale organizations. The issue that confronts members of the research and policy communities who have strong views about this issue, then, is one of designing a system that would classify rural systems in a way that would establish the nature of the diversity that does exist as a guide for influencing the formulation of federal policies (and, it is hoped, state policies as well) that are both effective and equitable.

But what rules of classification should be adhered to in this effort? What criteria ought to be used for the hoped-for construction of a rural school district policy-impact classification system that would better promote the national interest in education? Equally important, what alternative measures are available to operationalize these criteria once selected? These and other questions will be pursued in this paper.

Objective of Paper and Approach Used

The objective of this paper is two-fold. The intent is to stimulate a debate concerning the need for greater acknowledgment in federal education assistance programs of the diversity that exists among the nation's rural school districts and to initiate a discussion of how best to do this. The approach used to achieve this two-fold objective consists of four sequential steps.

First, I provide a rationale for why the statement concentrates on the need for the federal government and the research/school improvement communities supported by it to take the lead in the acknowledgment of the diversity that exists in the rural component of the public school universe. I then establish an overview of ways the federal government presently targets rural school districts and/or students who attend these schools, followed by a brief discussion of possible reasons that explain the federal reluctance to do more than it currently does.

Next, I propose the broad outline of a design for the construction of a rural school district policy-impact classification system that it is believed would be useful for stimulating the preferred broader-based discussion of the costs and benefits of the use of such a system. Included here is a discussion of the major assumptions I am willing to initially make in this beginning of what is a hoped-for concerted effort to build a useful policy-impact code. Also included is the identification of criteria that ought to be given prominence in the selection of measures for establishing the similarities and dissimilarities in rural districts, and the identification of alternative measures that appear to be available for operationalizing these criteria once selected. This is followed by the proposed design of a policy-impact code for classifying the nation's rural systems.

Finally, I suggest a number of next steps that

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ought to be taken to promote further the debate concerning the merits of the eventual construction of a meaningful policy-impact classification system for rural districts that would serve the federal pursuit of the unending and perhaps unendable quest for both equity and excellence in what, as will be documented below, is clearly still a very important segment of public education in this nation.

It should be apparent that the primary objective of this exercise, that of promoting a debate concerning the need to acknowledge better the rural district diversity and optional ways to do so, flows from the overarching, and also single, long-term strategic political goal held of influencing all facets of the federal policy cycle for education (e.g., the initiation, estimation, selection, implementation, evaluation, and termination phases[3]) to ensure better that rural school interests are promoted. The eventual development of a policy-impact code for classifying the nation's rural school districts represents a critical prerequisite first step toward this long-term strategic goal.

It is to be stressed that the paper stops short of arguing for a specific rural school typology, consistent with the part of the objective that promotes a debate concerning what is the most meaningful way to begin to do this. One could argue with each of the steps taken in the approach used here, and it is, of course, my hope that this be done. Also consistent with this paper's objective is my running up the proverbial flagpole a potentially useful conceptual and analytical approach for resolving what is clearly a serious public policy issue for the entire nation, not just rural interests, that should, indeed must, no longer be largely ignored.

I have no preconceptions that the inclusion of my early personal preferences of how one could address the issue of the most meaningful way to view the diversity existing in the rural component of the public school universe will somehow inhibit the debate. Indeed, my experience in matters like this suggests to me that just the opposite is likely; that is, the placement of one proposal on the table can just as likely result in raising the level of the debate. Moreover, I did not want this exercise to end by being just another in a long line of essays that call attention to the issue, but stop short of proposing a conceptual and analytical framework for the ultimate resolution of the issue.

What About the Definitional Issue?

Some might question whether it is possible to debate the issue of the need for and how best to design a rural district policy-impact classification system without first having reached a consensus concerning how one should define the object of the exercise—a rural school district. That is, as this line of argument would go, is not the beginning work on a policy-impact code such as that initiated here premature? Certainly a strong case can be made that the eventual adoption of a uniform definition of a rural system by various federal departments and independent agencies having an education mission is an absolute necessity to ensure that rural interests are promoted, not penalized, in federal policy initiatives, as I have argued in the past (Stephens, 1990). It is also clear that the widely disparate definitions used on occasion by various departments of the federal government, some of which strike me as highly questionable, stand as a serious obstacle for assessing the intended effects of current or planned federally-supported rural set-asides.[4] I continue to hold the position that a commonly used definition of a rural district is a necessary precondition for establishing equity and other policy effects, and am unpersuaded by the implied acceptance by some (Rios, 1988) that it does not seem possible to arrive at a consensus concerning how best to describe a rural school system.[5]

Nonetheless, the movement toward the construction of a useful policy-impact classification system, it can also be argued, might well be the best course of action to take at this time for the eventual resolution of the definitional issue. That is, the completion of a policy-impact code could facilitate the subsequent testing of the costs and benefits of the use of alternative definitions. Moreover, and importantly, proceeding with the development of a code would likely enjoy substantial political appeal in that, while avoiding some methodological issues, it would nonetheless provide a more focused direction for needed improvements in existing federal policy for rural districts, as well as other planned initiatives that might be considered in the short term. It is for these reasons that this exercise is being pursued.

NOTES

1. Certainly one needs to be cognizant of the wealth disparities that are present in a growing number of suburban communities, especially the inner ring areas surrounding a number of large urban centers. See especially du Vise's (1989) survey of 75 suburban areas and Bradley's (1991) commentary that summarizes data from the 1990 Census.

2. Three of what are viewed to be the best works yet undertaken to develop a way to type rural community-rural schools are those offered by Gjelten (1982), and especially Nachtigal (1982), and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (1988). All three make use of multidimensional socioeconomic factors.

3. The conceptualization of the federal policy cycle that makes use of these six phases is the one argued for by Brewer and deLeon (1983). I find it to be one of the most useful perspectives for organizing consideration of the complexities of the processes ordinarily engaged in at the federal level.

4. In a report completed in the early 1980s, the American Association of School Administrators (1984) reported that a number of criteria (e.g., sparsity or density of population, isolation or distance to urban centers, geographic location, smallness in size, economic and social conditions, sociocultural values, occupation of residents) are to be found in the literature or were used by government agencies for defining a rural school district. Of particular note, frequently multiple definitions of a rural system were used within a single federal agency.

5. Education is certainly not alone in struggling with the definitional issue. For example, in a useful review of 178 articles, books, and other sources from the literature on rural sociology and rural mental health, from the decade of the 1970s, Bosak and Perlman (1982) observed that four rural definitional categories were used:

   - **Not Stated:** (used in 77 of the 178 sources, or 43 percent of the time) where the author(s) used the term rural without definition (e.g., that which is not urban, that which is not metropolitan, or not stated at all).

   - **Verbal:** (used in 33 sources, or 19 percent of the cases) where a definition was employed that relied on qualitative criteria, rather than quantitative, such as type of predominant occupational, sociocultural, or value systems of a region. Although specific characteristics were described, amounts were not presented (e.g., a small town and surrounding farm area comprised the rural region).

   - **Homemade Quantitative:** (used in 27 sources, or 15 percent of the time) where a definition included specific quantities of what was rural without reference to an external source (i.e., the definition was not cited as based on previously published work or data).

   - **External Quantitative:** (used in 41, or 23

> percent, of the cases) where a definition indicated specific quantities of rural, utilizing external sources such as census data or previously published research (pp. 5-6).

Bosak and Perlman offer the frequent observation that the continued use of multiple definitions makes difficult the analysis of hypothesized urban-rural differences, hampers replication studies, and handicaps cross-sectional studies of different rural regions. Moreover, they conclude that there exists a need for more clearly delineated and multidimensional definitions of what is to be viewed as rural. Their hope is that the conceptualization of what truly is a heterogeneous rural would focus on sociocultural, as well as quantified factors such as occupation and population criteria (p. 25).

Though Bosak and Perlman's call for a new, widely accepted, multidimensional definition of rural is directed at the mental health community, it clearly has applicability not only for education but other public policy arenas as well.

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